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WHA/CAR for Jackie Rosholt
WHA/PDA for Chad West, Charlotte Peterson, and Barbara Rocha
INR for Bob Carhart
US EMBASSY BRASILIA for Brian Butcher

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SUBJECT: CUBAN TRANSITION IN THE SURINAMESE MEDIA: WELCOME BALANCE
AND CUSTOMARY INDIFFERENCE

REF: Paramaribo 74, Paramaribo 81

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. Coverage of the transition of power in Cuba by the Surinamese media featured mostly wire stories. Limited commentary was characterized by balance and mild criticism of the Cuban regime. Government of Suriname (GOS) public reflection was also balanced, with the exception of praise for Fidel Castro by GOS Minister of Health Celsius Waterberg. Criticism of undemocratic practices in Cuba was a welcome departure from customary Surinamese reticence on controversial issues. END SUMMARY.

Media Coverage: Balance and Indifference

12. (U) Coverage of the transition of power in Cuba in Surinamese newspapers was largely made up of wire stories taken either from the Associated Press or Dutch sources. Limited editorial reaction to Castro's resignation was typified by the quote, "what does that have to do with Suriname? At first glance, nothing..." courtesy of the "Times of Suriname," an opposition-oriented daily. This February 20 editorial went on to say Castro's resignation would be a good example for Suriname's aging leaders to follow, and featured a cartoon showing Castro resigning while Suriname's prominent politicians sat at the table drooling, snoring, and sucking their thumbs. Other commentary was more critical and outward-looking. "Dagblad Suriname," a second opposition-oriented daily, opined on February 22 that "[Castro's] promises of good leadership for the most part remained promises..." damaged by, for example, "eager use of bullets against Batista supporters." The editorial did praise the education and health systems in Cuba, but concluded it is now time for Raul Castro to take advantage of the opportunity reform the Cuban economy. The editorial repeated, without comment, remarks by President Bush calling for democracy in Cuba. A popular television talk show discussed the opening of a new Democracy Center in Suriname; when asked whether Cuba could be considered a type of democracy, one guest, a prominent local academic specializing in democracy, said no. The second guest, Jenny Simons, a prominent opposition parliamentarian from the nationalist, left-oriented National Democratic Party of Suriname, said the system currently in Cuba is not wanted here.

Government Reaction: Balance and Praise

13. (U) On February 25 the consensus paper-of-record, "De Ware Tijd," carried commentary on Cuba by major figures from the GOS. Speaking prior to the selection of Raul Castro, GOS Vice President

Ramdien Sardjoe said "we are all curious, but with the intention that we get a leadership there which responds to the aspirations of the Cuban people." Minister of Health Celsius Waterberg had praise for Castro, calling him a "world leader of stature." Commenting on Castro's health, Waterberg said "we find it only too bad... I think people will always be able to fall back on him for council." Waterberg was educated in Cuba and has a Cuban wife.

Comment

14. (SBU) Despite Cuba's prominence in the region, Surinamese reticence and overall indifference to political events in Cuba should not be surprising; Surinamese are typically inward focused, and loathe to get involved in controversy. For this reason, the mild criticism implied by Vice President Sardjoe's remarks, the direct criticism from a leftist opposition politician, and a balanced account including direct criticism in one of Suriname's opposition-oriented newspapers are bigger surprises. These are also good signs that Surinamers - as a rule practical and cynical - are less convinced by local Cuban propaganda than the steady stream of Cuban-Embassy-engineered press releases would like to suggest. END COMMENT

Schreiber Hughes